

❖ Understanding Politics

Politics is fascinating because it revolves around disagreement. People hold diverse views on how life should be lived, how resources and power should be distributed, and whether society should be organized around cooperation or conflict. They also differ on how to resolve these issues, such as who gets a say in decision-making and how much influence each person should have. Aristotle considered politics the 'master science,' as it is the means through which humans strive to improve their lives and build a just society. At its core, politics is a social activity, always involving dialogue and interaction between people. Unlike isolated individuals, who can create art or manage an economy alone, politics requires the presence of others. However, the same disagreements that drive political activity also lead to varying perspectives on the nature of politics itself and how it should be studied. Some define politics by where it occurs (within governments, the state, or the public sphere), while others focus on the type of activity it entails (such as resolving conflict peacefully or exercising power over weaker groups). Additionally, globalization has prompted some to question the division between politics and international relations as academic disciplines.

❖ Defining Politics

Broadly speaking, politics is the process through which people create, maintain, and modify the general rules that govern their lives. As an academic subject (often capitalized as 'Politics'), it focuses on studying this process. Politics is inherently tied to conflict and cooperation. On one side, the existence of differing opinions, needs, and interests guarantees disagreement over how society's rules should be structured. On the other side, people recognize the need to work together to influence or enforce these rules, leading to Hannah Arendt's definition of political power as 'acting in concert.' Consequently, politics is often seen as a process aimed at resolving conflicts between competing views and interests. However, it is more accurately described as the search for conflict resolution rather than its attainment, as not all conflicts can be resolved. The diversity among people and the scarcity of resources ensure that politics is an inevitable part of the human experience.

Two key challenges arise when trying to define politics. First, the term 'politics' is heavily loaded with preconceived notions and biases in everyday language. While subjects like economics or

history are approached more neutrally, people often assume that those involved in politics are inherently biased, making it difficult to view the subject impartially. Furthermore, politics is frequently associated with negativity, evoking images of disorder, deceit, and manipulation. This perception is not new, as Samuel Johnson once described politics as merely a means of self-advancement, and historian Henry Adams famously called it ‘the systematic organization of hatreds.’

The second challenge is that even experts disagree on what politics encompasses. Definitions range from the exercise of power and the science of government to collective decision-making, resource allocation, and manipulation. The definition offered here—‘the making, preserving, and amending of general social rules’—is broad enough to cover many of these interpretations. However, issues arise when trying to refine this definition. For example, does politics refer specifically to processes carried out peacefully and through debate, or to all forms of rule-making? Similarly, is politics confined to certain social contexts, such as government, or can it occur in all areas of life? These questions highlight politics as an ‘essentially contested’ concept, meaning it has several valid interpretations. Distinguishing between two general approaches can help clarify the meaning of politics. In one approach, politics is linked to a particular arena or location, meaning that an action becomes ‘political’ based on where it happens. In the other, politics is seen as a process, meaning political behavior is defined by its characteristics and can take place in any setting. These perspectives have given rise to different definitions and schools of political analysis. Ultimately, exploring the question ‘What is politics?’ sheds light on deep intellectual and ideological debates within the field.

❖ **Politics as the art of government**

Politics, as Bismarck famously remarked, is more of an art than a science. He referred to the art of governing, which involves the management of society through the creation and enforcement of collective decisions. This understanding of politics traces back to Ancient Greece, where the term "politics" comes from *polis*, meaning "city-state." In that context, politics concerned the governance of city-states, with Athens standing out as a model of democratic government. Today, politics can be understood as what pertains to the state. This idea is reflected in common phrases such as being "in politics," which typically refers to holding public office, or "entering politics," which means seeking such a position.

Academic political science has reinforced this view, emphasizing that politics involves the study of government and the exercise of authority. Influential scholars, like David Easton, describe politics as the "authoritative allocation of values," where governments respond to societal pressures by distributing benefits, rewards, and penalties. These "authoritative values" are those widely accepted by the society and are considered binding.

However, this definition offers a narrow view of politics, limiting it to the realm of government institutions and officials such as politicians, civil servants, and lobbyists. As a result, many aspects of social life—businesses, schools, and families—are seen as outside the political sphere because they are not directly involved in running the country. Moreover, this state-centric perspective neglects the growing influence of international and global factors on politics. The scope is sometimes even further reduced to party politics, where only those engaged in political parties and driven by ideological beliefs are considered political actors, while civil servants and judges are seen as neutral as long as they act impartially.

The close association of politics with politicians has also contributed to its negative image. Politicians are often viewed as power-hungry individuals disguising personal ambition with claims of public service. Media exposure has exacerbated this perception by highlighting instances of corruption, leading to widespread cynicism and "anti-politics." This skepticism is rooted in the liberal belief that political power tends to corrupt individuals, a notion famously captured by Lord Acton's saying, "power tends to corrupt, and absolute power corrupts absolutely."

Despite this negative view, there is a recognition that politics is a necessary part of social life. As much as politicians may be seen as flawed, there is a grudging acceptance that they are essential to preventing societal collapse into chaos. The challenge is not to eliminate politics, but to ensure that political power is exercised within a system of checks and balances to prevent abuse.

❖ **Politics as public affairs**

A broader understanding of politics extends beyond the limited scope of government to encompass what is considered 'public life' or 'public affairs.' This perspective distinguishes 'the political' from 'the non-political' by dividing life into public and private spheres. The roots of this view can be traced to the Greek philosopher Aristotle, who famously stated that 'man is by nature a political animal,' implying that humans can only achieve the 'good life' within a political community. From

this standpoint, politics is an ethical endeavor aimed at building a ‘just society,’ which Aristotle referred to as the ‘master science.’ However, the question arises: where does the line between public and private life lie? Traditionally, this distinction mirrors the separation between the state and civil society. The institutions of the state—such as government, courts, police, and the military—are considered ‘public’ because they are responsible for the collective management of society and are funded by taxpayers. In contrast, civil society consists of institutions like families, businesses, trade unions, and community groups, which are deemed ‘private’ as they are established by individuals to serve personal interests rather than those of society as a whole. According to this division, politics is confined to the state and the responsibilities of public bodies, while personal areas of life like the economy, social, and cultural activities are viewed as ‘non-political.’

An alternative way to define the ‘public/private’ divide involves distinguishing between ‘the political’ and ‘the personal.’ Although civil society is separate from the state, it contains institutions that are considered ‘public’ in the broader sense that they operate openly and are accessible to the public. This broader view of politics brings areas like the economy into the public realm, meaning political activity can be found in the workplace. Still, this perspective limits politics, asserting that it should not interfere with ‘personal’ matters. Feminist thinkers have critiqued this view, arguing that it confines politics to public spaces and excludes the family and personal relationships from political scrutiny. Politicians often reflect this view by drawing a line between their professional and personal lives, treating issues like infidelity or parenting as private matters with no bearing on their public conduct.

Viewing politics as a public activity has sparked both positive and negative interpretations. Following a tradition that began with Aristotle, some see politics as a noble and enlightened pursuit due to its public nature. Hannah Arendt, for instance, argued in *The Human Condition* (1958) that politics is the most important human activity because it involves interaction among free and equal citizens, giving life meaning and affirming individual uniqueness. Thinkers like Jean-Jacques Rousseau and John Stuart Mill have similarly argued that political participation is inherently valuable. Rousseau believed that only through continuous involvement in political life could citizens ensure the state served the common good, or the ‘general will,’ while Mill saw participation in public affairs as key to personal, moral, and intellectual growth.

On the other hand, politics as a public activity has also been viewed negatively, particularly by liberal theorists, who tend to favor civil society over the state. They argue that private life is a domain of personal freedom, choice, and responsibility. This perspective seeks to limit the role of politics in private spheres, advocating for a ‘hands-off’ approach to areas like business, sports, and family life. From this viewpoint, politics is seen as an intrusion, restricting individuals’ freedom to act as they wish. For example, it might dictate how companies operate, influence who we play sports with, or interfere with how we raise our children.

❖ **Politics as compromise and consensus**

The third perspective on politics focuses on the method by which decisions are made, rather than the setting in which politics occurs. Here, politics is understood as a means of resolving conflict through compromise, negotiation, and reconciliation, rather than force or coercion. This idea aligns with the notion of politics as ‘the art of the possible.’ A solution described as ‘political’ usually implies peaceful dialogue and mediation, contrasting with a ‘military’ solution. This view, rooted in Aristotle’s writings, especially his concept of ‘polity’ as an ideal system that blends aristocratic and democratic elements, has modern advocates such as Bernard Crick. In *In Defence of Politics* (1962), Crick defined politics as the process through which different interests within a society are reconciled by granting them power in proportion to their significance to the community’s well-being and survival.

According to this view, politics involves a broad distribution of power. Crick acknowledged that conflict is inevitable but argued that social groups with power must be accommodated, not crushed. He depicted politics as a solution to social order that favors conciliation over violence. This perspective is rooted in liberal and rationalist principles, emphasizing the effectiveness of discussion and debate, and assuming that society is built on consensus rather than unresolvable conflicts. In this sense, disagreements can be settled without resorting to violence. However, critics argue that Crick’s view is overly focused on the political systems of Western pluralist democracies, equating politics with elections and party competition, and offering little insight into one-party states or military regimes.

This view casts politics in a positive light, portraying it as a civilizing force. While compromise leaves no one completely satisfied, it is seen as a better alternative to violence and chaos. Politics, in this sense, encourages civic participation and respect for political processes. However, the

challenging and often frustrating nature of politics as a process of compromise may explain the growing disillusionment with democratic politics in much of the developed world. As Stoker (2006) noted, 'Politics is designed to disappoint,' with outcomes that are frequently unclear, imperfect, and unresolved.

❖ **Politics as power**

The fourth and most expansive definition of politics views it as a pervasive force in all aspects of social life, extending beyond traditional boundaries like government or the state. Adrian Leftwich, in *What is Politics? The Activity and Its Study* (2004), described politics as an intrinsic part of all social activity, whether formal or informal, public or private. It occurs at all levels of human interaction, from family dynamics to international relations.

What sets political activity apart from other social behaviors is its focus on the production, distribution, and use of resources. Essentially, politics is about power: the ability to achieve desired outcomes through various means. This idea is reflected in Harold Lasswell's definition of politics in *Politics: Who Gets What, When, How?* (1936). The concept of politics stems from the existence of scarcity, where human wants are infinite, but resources are limited. Politics, therefore, becomes a struggle over these limited resources, with power serving as the tool for conducting this struggle.

Feminists and Marxists are strong advocates of this view of politics as power. The feminist movement of the 1960s and 1970s expanded the idea of where politics takes place, as seen in the slogan "the personal is the political." Feminists also view politics as a process tied to power relations, where one group exercises control over another. Kate Millett, in *Sexual Politics* (1969), defined politics as "power-structured relationships," where one group dominates another.

Marxists, on the other hand, use the term "politics" in two senses. Marx himself referred to politics in the conventional sense as the apparatus of the state, describing political power as "the organized power of one class oppressing another" in *The Communist Manifesto* (1848). Marxists view politics as part of the "superstructure" (law, culture, etc.) that reflects and arises from the economic "base," which is central to social life. Therefore, political power is fundamentally rooted in class systems. As Lenin remarked, "politics is the most concentrated form of economics." For Marxists, politics extends beyond the state and includes the struggles within civil society, especially those involving class conflict.

Such views often present politics negatively, focusing on oppression and subjugation. Radical feminists argue that society is patriarchal, with women subjected to male power, while Marxists see capitalist politics as the exploitation of the proletariat by the bourgeoisie. However, politics is also seen as a force for liberation, capable of challenging injustice and domination. Marx anticipated that class exploitation would be overthrown by a proletarian revolution, and feminists call for a sexual revolution to reconfigure gender relations. Importantly, this view of politics as power and domination is not seen as a permanent condition. Feminists aim for a society free from "sexual politics," while Marxists envision the end of "class politics" with the rise of a classless communist society, ultimately leading to the "withering away" of the state and politics as traditionally understood.

❖ **Approaches to study Politics**

The study of politics is marked by significant disagreement over both its nature as an activity and as an academic field. Historically, politics was seen as part of philosophy, history, or law, with a focus on uncovering the principles that should govern human society. In the late 19th century, this philosophical approach was gradually replaced by efforts to make politics a scientific discipline. This trend reached its peak in the 1950s and 1960s when earlier traditions were rejected as irrelevant. Since then, the push for a purely scientific approach has waned, with a renewed appreciation for political values and normative theories. While the quest for universal values has largely been abandoned, so too has the belief that science alone can reveal truth. As a result, the field of politics has become more diverse, embracing various theoretical approaches and schools of thought.

❖ **The Philosophical Tradition**

The origins of political analysis trace back to Ancient Greece, rooted in what is often called "political philosophy." This tradition focused on ethical, prescriptive, or normative questions, dealing with what "should" or "ought" to happen, rather than just describing reality. Plato and Aristotle are considered pioneers of this tradition, and their ideas later influenced medieval thinkers like Augustine (354–430) and Aquinas (1225–74). For instance, Plato's work centered on outlining the ideal society, which he envisioned as a benevolent dictatorship led by philosopher kings.

This body of thought laid the groundwork for what is known as the "traditional" approach to politics. This method involves the critical examination of political ideas and doctrines that have been pivotal throughout history, often in the form of studying major political thinkers, from Plato to Marx, and their classic works. Like literary analysis, this approach is concerned with understanding what these thinkers said, how they justified their positions, and the intellectual environments they operated in. While it can be rigorous and critical, this type of analysis is not "objective" in a scientific sense, as it grapples with normative issues like "Why should one obey the state?" "How should rewards be distributed?" and "What are the limits of individual freedom?"

❖ The Empirical Tradition

The empirical tradition in political thought, though less dominant than normative theorizing, has roots stretching back to the earliest political thinkers. It is evident in Aristotle's efforts to categorize constitutions, Machiavelli's pragmatic insights on statecraft, and Montesquieu's sociological analysis of government and law. These writings laid the groundwork for what is now referred to as "comparative government," and fostered an institutional approach to political study. In the United States and the United Kingdom, this approach became the prevailing method of analysis.

The empirical tradition aims to provide an unbiased and objective account of political realities. It is descriptive, seeking to analyze and explain, in contrast to the normative tradition, which is prescriptive and offers judgments and recommendations. This method of political analysis is philosophically grounded in empiricism, a doctrine that gained momentum from the seventeenth century through thinkers like John Locke and David Hume. Empiricism asserts that experience is the sole source of knowledge, meaning that theories and hypotheses must be tested through observation.

By the nineteenth century, this approach evolved into "positivism," an intellectual movement most notably associated with Auguste Comte. Positivism advocated that the social sciences, like all philosophical inquiry, should follow the methods of the natural sciences. Once science was recognized as the most reliable path to truth, the drive to develop a science of politics became inevitable.

❖ Behaviouralism

Since the mid-nineteenth century, political analysis has been heavily influenced by the 'scientific' tradition, reflecting the rise of positivism. In the 1870s, universities like Oxford, Paris, and Columbia introduced 'political science' courses, and by 1906, the American Political Science Review was being published. The enthusiasm for a scientific approach to politics reached its height in the 1950s and 1960s, particularly in the USA, with the advent of behavioralism. This approach provided politics with scientific legitimacy by offering objective and quantifiable data for testing hypotheses. Scholars like David Easton (1979, 1981) argued that politics could use the methodologies of the natural sciences, leading to numerous studies in areas suited for quantitative research, such as voting behavior, legislative behavior, and the actions of municipal politicians and lobbyists. Behavioralism also attempted to apply itself to international relations, aiming to establish objective 'laws' of the field.

However, from the 1960s onward, behavioralism faced criticism. It was argued that the approach limited the scope of political analysis to only what was directly observable, potentially reducing the field to mere quantifiable data. This narrow focus risked neglecting essential normative concepts like 'liberty,' 'equality,' 'justice,' and 'rights,' which were sometimes dismissed as meaningless due to their lack of empirical verifiability. In the 1970s, interest in normative questions resurfaced, with theorists like John Rawls and Robert Nozick contributing to this revival.

Furthermore, the claim that behavioralism is objective and 'value-free' came under scrutiny. The approach's focus on observable behavior often resulted in merely describing existing political systems, which inadvertently reinforced the status quo. For example, 'democracy' was redefined to represent the competition between elites within democratic systems, rather than 'popular self-government' as originally intended. Thus, democracy came to be understood in the context of developed Western political systems.

❖ Rational-Choice Theory

One of the recent theoretical approaches in political analysis is known as 'rational-choice theory' or 'formal political theory,' which also goes by names such as 'public-choice theory' and 'political economy.' This approach emulates economic theory by creating models based on procedural rules that focus on the rational and self-interested behavior of individuals. Predominantly established in

the USA, and notably associated with the Virginia School, formal political theory offers a valuable analytical tool for understanding the actions of voters, lobbyists, bureaucrats, politicians, and even states within the international system.

A prominent application of this approach is in 'institutional public-choice theory,' which examines topics like party competition, interest-group behavior, and bureaucratic influence on policy. Key contributors to this field include Anthony Downs (1957), Mancur Olson (1968), and William Niskanen (1971). Additionally, game theory, which originates more from mathematics than economics, is used to analyze individual behavior through fundamental principles. A famous example in game theory is the 'prisoners' dilemma,' and it has been employed by international relations theorists to address issues such as overfishing and arms proliferation.

Despite its contributions, rational-choice theory has not been universally accepted. While proponents argue that it adds rigor to political analysis, critics have challenged its fundamental assumptions. They argue that it may overestimate human rationality, as people often do not have clear goals or make decisions with complete information. Moreover, rational-choice theory tends to overlook social and historical contexts, failing to consider that self-interested behavior may be influenced by social conditioning rather than being purely innate.

❖ **New institutionalism**

Until the 1950s, the study of politics largely revolved around the examination of institutions, focusing on the rules, procedures, and formal organization of government. This approach, known as 'traditional' or 'old' institutionalism, used methods similar to those in law and history. However, during the 1960s and 1970s, the rise of the 'behavioral revolution,' along with criticism of institutionalism's descriptive and unreflective methods, led to its decline. Critics argued that institutionalism risked reducing politics to a collection of organizational rules and structures.

From the 1980s, interest in institutionalism was renewed with the development of 'new institutionalism.' While still upholding the belief that institutions influence political behavior, new institutionalism broadened the concept of what an 'institution' is. Political institutions were no longer seen solely as organizations but rather as sets of rules that shape or constrain the actions of individuals. These rules can be informal as well as formal, with unwritten conventions often having a significant influence on decision-making processes. This view helps explain why institutions can

be resistant to reform or replacement. Moreover, new institutionalists argue that institutions are embedded in a specific historical and normative context. Actors within institutions are socialized to follow key rules and procedures, while the institutions themselves are shaped by broader cultural assumptions and practices.

Despite these shifts, institutionalism still faces criticism, particularly for its structuralist tendencies. Some argue that it views political actors as being overly constrained by the institutions in which they operate, making them 'prisoners' of their institutional environments.

❖ Critical approaches

Since the 1980s, the range of critical approaches to politics has significantly broadened. Previously, Marxism was the primary alternative to mainstream political science, with Karl Marx being one of the first to attempt a scientific analysis of politics. Using what he called the "materialist conception of history," Marx aimed to identify the driving forces behind historical development, allowing him to predict the future based on certain "laws" comparable to those in the natural sciences. However, modern political analysis has become more varied and nuanced with the introduction of newer critical perspectives, such as feminism, critical theory, green politics, constructivism, post-structuralism, and postcolonialism. These perspectives may seem united only by their opposition to mainstream thought due to their differing philosophical bases and political views.

Despite their diversity, these critical approaches share two broad characteristics. First, they challenge the political status quo by aligning themselves, in different ways, with marginalized or oppressed groups. Their goal is to uncover and highlight inequalities that mainstream approaches tend to overlook. For instance, feminism has shed light on the widespread structures of gender inequality that exist at all levels of politics. Critical theory, rooted in the Frankfurt School's neo-Marxism, has broadened its critique to all social practices, drawing on a variety of influences, including Freud and Weber. Green politics, or ecologism, has questioned the human-centered focus of traditional political and social theory, advocating for a more holistic understanding of politics. Postcolonialism focuses on the cultural impacts of colonialism, revealing how Western cultural and political dominance has continued even after formal independence was achieved across much of the developing world.

The second characteristic is that these approaches have moved beyond the positivism of mainstream political science, emphasizing the role of consciousness in shaping social behavior and the political landscape. These post-positivist perspectives, also known as interpretivism or anti-foundationalism, not only question the conclusions of mainstream approaches but also critically examine the methods and assumptions underlying them. This is evident in constructivism and post-structuralism. Constructivism, which has had a greater impact on international relations than on political science, is more of an analytical tool than a theory. It argues that individuals "construct" their reality, suggesting that the world functions through a shared understanding. By doing so, constructivists challenge the claim of objectivity in mainstream political analysis, as political actors' interests and identities are shaped by prevailing traditions, values, and sentiments, rather than being fixed.

Post-structuralism, often associated with postmodernism, focuses on how language, deeply connected to power structures, shapes ideas and concepts. Influenced by French philosopher Michel Foucault, post-structuralists explore the relationship between power and knowledge through the concept of discourse, or "discourses of power." This perspective suggests that knowledge itself is a form of power. In the absence of a universal framework or perspective, there are only competing viewpoints, each representing a different power discourse. While post-structuralism and postmodernism reject the idea of universal truth (foundationalism), post-structuralists argue that it is possible to reveal hidden meanings in concepts and theories through deconstruction.